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ABSTRACT

As college teachers and graduate assistants cope with the everyday demands of their profession, they may not feel like members of an elite group. As members of the academy, however, they occupy a space that is in many ways quite privileged. They work with ideas rather than tools; they critique social structures rather than simply living them; and their closest friends have Ph.D.'s and are usually published authors, journal editors, and program directors. Some come to the academy from working and rural classes, classes whose values often actively critique and undermine the values of the university. Some aspects of a rural/working class orientation are at odds with that of a research university, such as: (1) an abhorrence of hypocrisy; (2) an emphasis on community, reciprocity, and inclusiveness; (3) a horror of being arrogant or exclusive; (4) the experience of being consistently misread; and (5) the use of self-deprecating humor. These class-related traits affect the job search in several ways, including topics pursued for a dissertation, jobs which are appealing, the way a person presents himself/herself, and how schools interpret applications. The more analyses of these intuitive class-based practices can be articulated and integrated alongside other, more traditionally valorized categories of critique, the more they can be understood as motivators of the personal and political practices of individuals, colleagues, and students. (CR)

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ED 406 685

Class Isn't Just Something Students Attend (To)

By Cheryl Reed

As we cope with the everyday demands of our profession, we may not feel like members of an elite group. Yet as members of the academy, we occupy a space that is in many ways quite privileged. We work with ideas rather than tools; we critique social structures rather than simply living them; our closest friends have Ph.D's and are usually published authors, journal editors, and program directors. Yet, some of us come to the academy from the working and rural classes, classes whose values often actively critique and undermine the values of the university. When these conflicting value systems fight it out within a single psyche, it can raise issues regarding one's own perception and interpretation of everyday experience. How do working or rural class values negotiate the academy? As writing instructors, are we always already part of a privileged elite? Does our position within the academy necessarily ameliorate issues of social and economic class?

These issues were nagging, unarticulated static in the back of my thoughts at the time I entered grad school. My writing had always allowed me to "pass" as a rather eccentric returning student because it carried none of the negative class markers that studies like Maxine Hairston's have pointed out. I always approached any dissonance with my surroundings as personal problems---either mine or those of whomever was irking me. By my third year of graduate teaching, however, questions of class had become insistent enough that I was considering leaving the academy. There was something wrong with the overall "fit" or "feel" of the situations I inhabited, something that made me

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question the overall project of teaching, itself. Like Dorothy in the Land of Oz, I can remember battling a persistent mental refrain: I want to go home, I want to go home, I want to go home. Disconcertingly, however, I could not longer define "home."

An incident with one of my students made this conflict visible for me. I'd always felt a particular bond with Katherine because she was open, unaffected, and because both of our fathers were ranchers. During the earthquakes in Northern California a few years ago, she came to me with an ashen face to tell me that her boyfriend's family had suffered several hundred thousand dollars' damage. I was appalled, thinking that perhaps his home had been demolished. However, she went on: "Yeah, the *garage* was almost completely destroyed." It was at that point that I went searching for a student population that hadn't always already taken college as a given. About this time, I was also becoming enthusiastic about literacy narratives. La Vergne Rosows's In Forsaken Hands astounded me with its description of its student population: even though I had never experienced the poverty and the lack of education described in the book, the values and system of priorities Rosow's non-reading students exhibited were very similar to those I had grown up with, and still intuitively embraced.

Let's take a quick look at a few, easily articulable aspects of this rural/working-class orientation. I've chosen them because they are very much at odds with the orientation of the research University where I trained, and because they had a marked impact on how I, and others like me, negotiated our graduate studies, our relationships with peers and mentors, and eventually the job

search and beyond. I want to stress here that these are intuitive, and, like all naturalized practices, seem patently absurd when explicitly defined and analyzed.

1) **An abhorrence of hypocrisy**.

You present the same "front" to everyone. If friend or foe asks you how you feel about living in San Diego, you mention nice weather along with smog, high rents, and crowding.

2) **An emphasis on community, reciprocity, and inclusiveness.**

You intuitively tend toward student-centered pedagogies, women's studies, and popular culture, share your access to resources, and are always a bit disconcerted when you don't sense support coming back your way.

3) **A horror of being arrogant or exclusive**

The "aw shucks, mam it was nothing" stance.

4) **The experience of consistently being misread.**

This is being told, "You've got such a great sense of humor" when you're not joking.

5) **Using self-deprecating humor.**

This aims at deflecting charges of arrogance when success makes you overly visible. It should signal that you're not going to use intellectual, social or economic power in a way that would divide you from the group. However, many times it's read as a lack of self-confidence.

So how do all these class-related traits and near-misses at understanding affect the job search (something many of us, and certainly I, have been giving a great deal of consideration these past few months)? Here are just a few ways they affected mine:

1) **The topics I pursued for my dissertation**, the methods I used to pursue them, and the ways in which I communicated the relevance of these topics to potential colleagues were affected. Both my gender and my class of origin draw me toward examinations of social contexts, toward issues that resist one definitive interpretation, toward approaches that rescue forgotten or misunderstood texts or theories, and toward interdisciplinarity and collaboration. These choices, of course, had to be accounted for in job applications and interviews.

2) My class roots also affected **which jobs appealed to me.** I was attracted to colleges that emphasized faculty community, that expressed an orientation toward student success rather than personal prestige, and that overtly aimed at reaching traditionally underrepresented student populations.

3) **The way I presented myself** in my applications and interviews was also affected by my roots. My first CV downplayed my graduation from a respected research university, made my publications an optional appendix to my application, and stressed my recent experience teaching community college. During campus interviews, I found it disconcerting to be the center of attention for days on end. Ironically, in order to become part of a teaching-oriented

team, I had to market myself as an *individual* with outstanding achievements.

4) **The way schools interpreted my applications** and my interview presence were also affected by disparate value systems and communicative strategies, even when our underlying goals were articulated using the same terms. In one situation, my willingness to pay travel expenses for an on-campus interview was questioned during the interview. Even though they'd told me that they were consistently underbudgeted for recruitment because they were targeting a student population that state authorities wanted swept under the rug, my flexibility raised a red flag.

My particular job search had a happy ending, because I just recently accepted an offer for a tenure-track position in composition. Luckily, I seem to have found an institution in which the things that speak of my privilege---my training, my ease with language, and my resources---enable those which speak of my class roots---community, reciprocity, collaboration, and an orientation toward students. One of my interviewers teased me for being a "Marxist" because I spoke with such feeling about institutional, economic, and social structures that keep at-risk students---at risk. But I was talking about lived experience, not theory.

Class disparity impacts us personally as we negotiate the job market, but, as more and more working class students succeed in negotiating their paths through the academy, and as class becomes a respectable category for scholarly investigation, issues like the ones I've discussed here will, I think,

begin to seem less like personal anecdotes and more like alternate discursive modes and practices. The more we can articulate analyses of these intuitive, class-based practices and integrate them alongside other, traditionally valorized categories of critique, the more we can understand them as motivators of the personal and political practices of our colleagues, our students, and ourselves.

WORK CITED

Rosow, La Vergne. In Forsaken Hands: How Theory Empowers Literacy Learners. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1995.